

Screen time: Overview

Reviewed by SickKids Staff | Last updated: May 22nd 2020

Find out how much screen time your child should have each day and how screen time affects your child's health and wellbeing.

Key points

- Screen time is the amount of time your child spends using a device that has a screen such as a TV, computer, games console, tablet or smartphone.
- The recommended amount of screen time depends on a child's age. Children under 2 years should not have any screen time and those under 5 years should have less than two hours a day.
- Spending too much time in front of a screen can negatively impact your child's physical and mental health.

What is screen time?

Screen time is the amount of time your child spends using a device that has a screen. It includes time spent watching television, browsing the internet, using a cell phone and playing video games. Screen time often limits a child's opportunity to get active or spend time outdoors. Over time, low levels of [physical activity](#) can negatively impact their health.



The technology children have access to today is changing their world and providing them with endless access to information and opportunities. The downside is that it is very easy for children (and even adults) to become overstimulated forget about other fun and healthy activities.

According to the Canadian Health Measures Survey, on average, 76% of Canadian children aged 5-11 years met the recommendation of no more than 2 hours of screen time per day. However, only 26% of adolescents aged 12-17 met the recommendation.

Due to the increasing amount of screen time in our daily lives, it may not be surprising that much of our physical movement is being displaced by more sedentary activities.

How screen time affects physical and mental health

Screen time has been linked to lower levels of physical fitness and problems with mental health and social development.

- Children who spend more time in front of screens tend to have higher obesity rates than children who spend less time in front of screens.
- Children and teens who watch more than two hours of TV a day have lower scores of self-esteem and self-worth.
- Higher levels of screen time have been linked to lower school performance, partly because children who watch more TV tend to spend less time on homework.
- Screen time is often associated with unhealthy eating habits. For instance, if your child is distracted by a television show or video game while they eat, they may not be able to recognize when they are full. It is also easy for your child to associate screen time with enjoying a favourite food.

While active video games are advertised as a good way to encourage physical activity, children and teens quickly learn how to play using minimal gestures (for example using wrist movement only). This greatly reduces the amount of movement energy they use.

How much screen time is 'too much'?

Daily screen time recommendations largely depend on the age of the child. The Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) and the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) recommend the following daily limits.

- Children under aged 2 and under: no screen time
- Children aged 2 to 4: less than one hour a day of screen time
- Children and teens aged 5 to 17: maximum of two hours a day of recreational screen time (watching television, messaging friends or playing computer games)

Screen time is an important and unavoidable part of your child's life, especially as they get older. For instance, older children may need to spend more time on a computer to complete homework or on their phones to stay in touch with friends. There are also different types of screen time: using a phone or computer to video call a family member has a different effect on a developing brain than watching a stream of videos.

If your child needs to be at home for an extended period of time, screen use for school, homework and interacting with family and peers is necessary. However, it is important to take frequent breaks from screen time and avoid long periods of sitting. Additionally, it is important to maintain or set limits on 'browsing' or video game playing time. As a parent, it is important to model appropriate screen use. More research into screen time will be needed as technology continues to evolve.

How to calculate your child's current daily screen time

Using the table below, calculate the time your child spends using screens on a normal day by adding up the various categories. When you have the total time, you can decide if you need to [set limits on screen time](#) and encourage your child to spend more time on other activities.

Screen time activity	Examples
Watching television	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Watching cartoons, reality shows, sports, documentaries, news, game shows, talk shows, movies
Using the internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Watching streamed TV shows or movies ■ Instant messaging ■ Downloading music ■ Playing online games ■ Using social media websites and apps
Using a computer or tablet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reading or writing documents ■ Playing a computer game ■ Creating a drawing in a computer program ■ Browsing or editing photos ■ Listening to music ■ Writing computer programs
Using a cell phone or smart watch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reading and writing text messages ■ Playing games ■ Using apps ■ Listening to music
Playing games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Using a game console ■ Using a children's smartphone with built-in games

How to tell if your child has too much screen time

Screen time becomes unhealthy when your child is glued to a screen for most of the day. If your child's screen time falls outside the recommended limits for their age, you may notice some concerning signs.

Children and teens who spend too much time in front of a screen may seem:

- lonely
- sad
- overly tired
- stressed or fearful
- isolated from friends or family
- withdrawn
- nervous
- agitated or tense
- aggressive or angry.

They may also have emotional outbursts and have difficulties making and keeping friends.

Some children also have difficulties concentrating and lose interest in school or other hobbies. A decrease in physical activity (including the many benefits that come along with this behaviour) may also result from high amounts screen time.

It is important to note that some of these issues may have causes other than excessive screen time. See your child's doctor if you have any concerns about your child's physical or mental health.

What to do about screen time and tantrums

For more videos from SickKids experts in collaboration with Youngster, visit [Youngster on YouTube](#).

Visit our teen mental health website for tips on how your teen can balance their screen time:

- [Screen time for teens: Overview](#)
- [Setting limits and staying safe with screen time](#)

Colley et al. (2011). Physical activity of Canadian children and youth: Accelerometer results from the 2007 to 2009 Canadian Health Measures Survey. Statistics Canada. Vol. 22(1)

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